

# The Long, Slow Death of White Australia

Gwenda Tavan

Reviewed by Max Tapping

Dr Gwenda Tavan, the daughter of Italian immigrants, teaches Australian politics at La Trobe University in Melbourne. This is her first book and is based on her doctoral thesis. It is well researched, very readable and on the whole refreshingly free of academic fad or political polemic.

A particular strength is that it discusses Australian immigration policy in a much wider political, social and grand strategic context than most recent attempts. A proper discussion of the place of immigration policy and its history cannot be undertaken without some coverage of the necessarily inter-related subjects of nationality, citizenship, national identity and cohesion, and Australia's national strategy and international relations generally. The reverse also applies.

Other recent attempts, such as Brian Galligan and Winsome Roberts' *Australian Citizenship* and Alison Broinowski's *About Face*, have failed profoundly in this regard, being merely narrowly focused vehicles for the parading of empty academic fashions or the advancement of ideological or political hobbyhorses.

*The Long, Slow Death*, however, largely avoids the simplistic myth that Australians and our society are somehow inherently racist, and disparages the canard that we are uniquely so in the Asia-Pacific region. Tavan notes that there is no evidence 'that the dismantling of White Australia was significantly out of step with public demands. The changes to policy were a largely pragmatic response by Australian political leaders both to the changing circumstances in which Australia found itself and to the changing values of Australian society'. Tavan argues that 'race' alone does not dictate public attitudes to immigration, 'and never has. Other factors are also important, including the economic, strategic and cultural environment in which policies are formulated and discussed'.

The book provides balanced coverage of the immigration debates within Australian political parties, the community generally and across the wider political, diplomatic and bureaucratic processes. Tavan credits those within all parties who worked hard to broaden the scope of immigration criteria, and rightly acknowledges that the Democratic Labor Party was the first party to reject the White Australia policy outright.

Tavan's coverage of the history of Australian immigration policy from before federation up to the election of the Whitlam government is perhaps better argued than its accounts of 1973 onwards. Tavan notes the particular reform efforts of Hubert Opperman, Billy Snedden and Phillip Lynch on the conservative side of politics, Don Dunstan and Gough Whitlam for Labor, and Peter Heydon, the Secretary of the Immigration Department 1961-71. Her coverage of the purges of immigration reformers in the ALP in the late 1950s and early to mid 1960s also highlights a story rarely

told and consequently now rarely believed. Tavan's discussion of the contribution of Al Grassby errs on the side of perpetuating the flamboyant legend, rather than the reality of this flawed individual and his controversial motivations and record, but no book on this topic could be written without some mention of him.

There are three areas that could be improved in further editions.

Tavan discusses various real and perceived causes for the practice of exclusion on ethnic or cultural grounds but does not cover the contributory principles of national unity and the control of 'aliens'. The entry of immigrants presumed to offer no or little security risk, and the exclusion of those thought to threaten national cohesion, who were obviously different or, at best, had potentially divided national loyalties played a large part in the development and practice of Australian immigration policy. No discussion of how potential immigrants were excluded, to whatever degree, on racial or cultural grounds can afford to ignore the concomitant risks of alien loyalties or unnecessarily divisive beliefs or cultural practices. These are part and parcel of individual, family and community identity, and during the period of exclusionary immigration policies, were generally closely tied to an individual's ethnicity and original nationality.

A second weakness of the book is that the discussion of Australian history after the end of the White Australia policy lacks the objectivity and political balance applied to earlier chapters. Some critical analysis of politically-imposed 'multiculturalism', as opposed to popular acceptance of Australia naturally evolving as a genuine cosmopolitan society, would also be useful in such a reflection on the current effects of the exclusionary policies of yesteryear.

Finally, the book is well-indexed but would have been improved in parts by graphical representations of the trends and statistics discussed.

The 'White Australia' policy slowly faded away throughout the 1950s and 1960s as Australia changed profoundly and the world changed around us. The rate of policy reform tended to be kept in check by politicians from both sides of politics who feared outpacing what they believed was the opinion of their respective constituencies. Interestingly, we rightly condemn the White Australia policy from the viewpoint of modern Australia, but oddly fail to recognise similar and often far worse policies still practised by many of our Asian neighbours. ♦

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